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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Thailand: Trouble Ahead for Cambodian Policy? []

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Summary

Vietnam's strong offensive this past dry season against Cambodian resistance forces and ASEAN's appeal for arms from other countries for the resistance dramatically raised the stakes for Thailand's Cambodian policy. Aggressive Vietnamese cross-border attacks, the elimination of all major resistance bases along the Thai-Cambodian border, and banditry by Cambodian guerrillas have prompted serious debate for the first time in Bangkok--both in official and nongovernment circles--about the future of Thailand's policy. []

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Hardline Thai policymakers--in particular Foreign Minister Siddhi--will probably retain control of policy toward Cambodia for the short-term. We believe that in the longer term, however, as the present policy grows increasingly costly for Bangkok, a shift toward compromise with Hanoi is probable. A change in government, possibly in 1987 when Prime Minister Prem's term ends, or the departure of a key official such as Foreign Minister Siddhi might provide an opportunity for Bangkok to change its policy. []

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State Dept. review completed

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This memorandum was prepared by [] Office of East Asian Analysis, and coordinated within the Directorate of Intelligence. Information available as of 26 April 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA, []

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Turning Point

The last dry season offensive by Vietnamese troops against the Cambodian resistance marked a turning point, in our view, that has serious implications for Thailand's security. PAVN forces overran every major guerrilla base along the Thai-Cambodian border, and in doing so, forced more than 240,000 Khmer into Thai territory. [redacted] contrary to previous years, Vietnamese forces will not withdraw from the border when the rainy season begins this month. The Khmer displaced by the offensive thus seem likely to remain on Thai soil for an extended period. Furthermore, Vietnamese troops are crossing into Thai territory deeper and more frequently than ever before in seeking to prevent recently uprooted resistance forces from regrouping effectively. [redacted]

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Bangkok's response thus far has been to dig in its heels, issue harsh public denunciations of Vietnam, and refuse to consider negotiations with Hanoi as long as Vietnamese forces remain on Thai soil. After providing limited military support to Cambodian resistance areas during most of the offensive, Thai aircraft and artillery were heavily involved in responding to Vietnamese incursions into Thai territory during the attack on Ta Tum in March--and the Thai Army took greater casualties this year than before. For its part, ASEAN, in a break with past strategy, appealed for political and military support for the Cambodian resistance from "third countries"--implicitly including the United States. [redacted]

The Hard Core

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We believe Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda has delegated Cambodian policy primarily to three officials--Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, Secretary-General Prasong Sunsiri of the National Security Council, and Army Deputy Chief of Staff Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. While Siddhi directs efforts on the diplomatic front, Prasong is in charge of Bangkok's policy toward all Indochinese refugees. Lt. General Chavalit coordinates Chinese and ASEAN military aid to the resistance and is the principal architect of non-Communist resistance strategy. [redacted]

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These three policymakers take a hardline on Cambodia. Their stated goal is to increase military and diplomatic pressure on Vietnam until Hanoi agrees to a favorable political settlement--from the Thai perspective. In his diplomatic activities, Siddhi has also attempted to keep ASEAN's position on Cambodia as close to his own uncompromising views as possible; he has several times dampened initiatives by the Indonesian and Australian Foreign Ministers, whom he considers sympathetic toward Hanoi. [redacted]

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Other Voices

Until recently, the costs to Thailand of its Cambodian policy were low, and there was no serious challenge to the

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policymaking monopoly held by Siddhi, Prasong, and Chavalit. Because decisionmaking was so tightly held, unity was not a problem until recent border events. But the shocks of the recent Vietnamese offensive and differing perspectives have resulted in what the US Embassy terms a new mood of anxiety within and outside the government about the situation in Cambodia. Some recently voiced concerns about Thailand's hardline policy include:

- Potential for polarization of the region and increasing risk of war because of intensified clashes between Thai and Vietnamese forces.
- The possibility of eventual victory by Vietnam, whether or not Thailand accepts the Heng Samrin regime.
- The fragility of the Cambodian anti-Vietnamese coalition.
- Possible sell-out by the ASEAN allies and/or China.

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[REDACTED]

The new mood of anxiety is reflected in varying degrees in key sectors of Thai society: policymakers, the military, politicians, and the press and intellectuals. [REDACTED]

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An underlying element in the debate seems to be heightened concern that China will subordinate its support for Thailand to its interest in improving relations with the Soviet Union.

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Moreover, the fact that intense fighting between Thai and Vietnamese forces occurred during the Chinese president's trip to Bangkok in March probably underscored Thai worries about China's effectiveness as a check on Hanoi.

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Military foot-dragging. The upper echelons of the Thai military have benefited to a limited extent from the confrontation with Vietnam over Cambodia by using it to justify the purchase of sophisticated weaponry, including US F-16s. Segments of the military, however--such as field commanders--have all along undercut official policy by not responding vigorously to Vietnamese action along the border.

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Army officers simply want to avoid confrontations with Vietnamese forces. In our view, several factors account for this:

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- Concern that the costs--in casualties and materiel--of engaging a superior force would be too high. US military officials in Bangkok believe that the Thai military cannot hope to secure the border against Vietnamese incursions because of inadequate money, manpower, training, and equipment.
- Fear of provoking additional Vietnamese attacks.
- Assumptions that Vietnamese incursions will continue to be limited in time and scope--as they were before the most recent dry season campaign.
- Belief that the United States would aid Thailand in the event of an actual Vietnamese invasion.

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In addition, the US Embassy notes that, for many officers in the field, the resistance forces represent a nuisance rather than a needed foreign policy tool.

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despite Bangkok's policy of supporting anti-Vietnamese guerrillas, the influential commander of the First Army Area even publicly stated that

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Cambodia should be partitioned, and half of the country given to Vietnam. [REDACTED]

Input from the politicians. Thailand's involvement in Cambodia has never been a major domestic issue, but former Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan has long been a vocal, if opportunistic, critic of the present policy. Kriangsak--now a member of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and leader of one of the ruling parties--originated the present policy, but the US Embassy reports that he is convinced that Siddhi has taken it too far. He argues that this escalation has led to a dangerous "loss of balance" in Thai diplomacy, while failing to force Hanoi to bargain. Since this year's Vietnamese offensive, other parliamentarians have expressed similar misgivings about Cambodian policy, including some rank-and-file politicians from Prem's coalition, according to the press. In addition, the US Embassy reports that leaders of the opposition party may use the issue to attack the government during the upcoming session of Parliament. [REDACTED]

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Press and academic comment. Press commentary on Cambodia has been mixed--with some journalists emphasizing the need to be "strong" with Vietnam and others urging ASEAN to consider the dangers of open confrontation. In particular, the ASEAN appeal for military assistance to the Cambodian resistance prompted a spate of editorials questioning the wisdom of the step, according to the US Embassy. Despite mixed opinions about the present policy, however, media commentators have tended to stress Thailand's vulnerability and the human and material costs of the war along the border. Stories of assaults on Thai villagers by Vietnamese intruders or armed Cambodian guerrillas have appeared more frequently, amid complaints that Thailand is serving the policy interest of ASEAN, China, and the United States while bearing the costs all alone. Other themes in press coverage have been the ineffectiveness of the resistance as a military force and worries about a residual Khmer refugee population in Thailand. [REDACTED]

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In intellectual circles, Professor Sukhumphan Baripatra of Chulalongkorn University stands out as the most prominent critic, according to the US Embassy. Dr. Sukhumphan fears that increasing military confrontation between Vietnam and Thailand could eventually lead to the return of military dictatorship. He argues that Thailand should recognize Vietnamese influence in Indochina, while seeking a Vietnamese military withdrawal and the establishment of a government of national reconciliation in Phnom Penh. Although the US Embassy notes that Sukhumphan's views are generally unpopular with his peers, student leaders in Bangkok told a US diplomat that they oppose the present policy as well. They believed Thailand should distance itself from ASEAN and the United States and adopt a more neutral stand on the issue. They said they doubted that Vietnam intended to invade Thailand. [REDACTED]

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Will Bangkok Hang On?

Muddling through in the short term. Over the next year, we believe Foreign Minister Siddhi and the other hardliners will succeed in bolstering their stand against critics, who generally seem to have no clear alternatives in mind. In our opinion, Vietnamese incursions in the short term could solidify support for the hardliners by provoking a nationalistic backlash. Once the rainy season begins, the usual lull in fighting may give the shocks of the recent offensive several months to fade, while Siddhi, Chavalit, and Prasong work to solidify their position. Furthermore, domestic concerns--economic reforms, party factionalism, the Prime Minister's continuing rivalry with Army Commander Arthit--seem likely to divert attention from Cambodia for the next several months.

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Long-range changes likely. Over the next three to five years, however, we are much less certain that the Thai will choose to continue their present policy. Based on our analysis, we do not expect major improvements in the Cambodian military situation soon. Furthermore, in our opinion, Vietnam is unlikely to relent in its apparent decision to overpower the resistance militarily. The cost of Thailand's Cambodia policy is therefore likely to become both higher and more noticeable to the Thai public, which probably will lead to increased debate:

- Logistics bases and command headquarters of the resistance forces will be in Thai territory for the foreseeable future, compromising Bangkok's claim to be the victim of Vietnamese aggression.
- Vietnamese operations against guerrilla activities on Thai soil will probably increase in number and intensity, as the Vietnamese try to prevent the resistance from regrouping militarily, with more Thai troops and civilians being killed. Rhetoric from some Thai officials about the right to preemptive action against Vietnamese troops increases the probability of such attacks.
- Thailand may be forced to allow more than 200,000 Khmer guerrillas and civilians to remain on Thai soil for an indefinite period. [redacted] there is growing concern within the Army over the potential for disruptive activities in Thailand by Khmer Rouge and the non-Communist guerrillas. [redacted]

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We cannot be sure at what point these costs and diplomatic pressures will prove too much for Thai policymakers; however, given previous diplomatic realignments, we believe that Bangkok will eventually compromise with Hanoi. Possible junctures at which the Thai might shift toward a compromise include:

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- A change in government. If Prem steps down in 1987 when his present term ends, the transition might allow Bangkok a chance to reassess Cambodian policy or retreat as gracefully as possible.
 - A change in personnel. Deputy Chief of Staff Chavalit has said he will retire from the Army in two years. Because Chavalit has been the brains behind Thai military aid to the resistance, his departure or transfer to another position less involved with supporting the resistance (neither of which are certain) might lead to a winding down of Thailand's covert support program.
 - Another possibility is that Foreign Minister Siddhi might leave office, although we believe this is unlikely because Siddhi is so close to the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, should he be replaced, his successor might choose a different course of action.

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Appendix A

Motivating Factors

In our judgment, the three key decisionmakers on Cambodia are deeply distrustful of Hanoi and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. Like many Thai, Siddhi, Chavalit, and Prasong are suspicious of Vietnamese intentions toward Thailand,* and they see Vietnam's goal in Indochina as the creation of Vietnamese "satellites" in place of traditional buffer states. In conversations with US officials, Thai officials emphasize their concern about the potential for Hanoi-backed subversion using Thai Communists or the Vietnamese minority in Thailand--fears we find exaggerated. A secondary concern is the increasing Soviet influence in Indochina, particularly the expansion of Soviet military activity at Cam Ranh Bay, and the presence of Soviet military advisers in Indochina.

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*A USIA survey of 1,327 Thai adults in Bangkok and provincial cities in November 1984 found that Vietnam was viewed as the country "most likely" to attack Thailand. Respondents chose Vietnam over Cambodia by a margin of 31 percent to 13 percent. In the same poll, about half the respondents said they believed an attack on Thailand was either "very likely" or "fairly likely."

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Appendix B

What Does Bangkok Really Want?

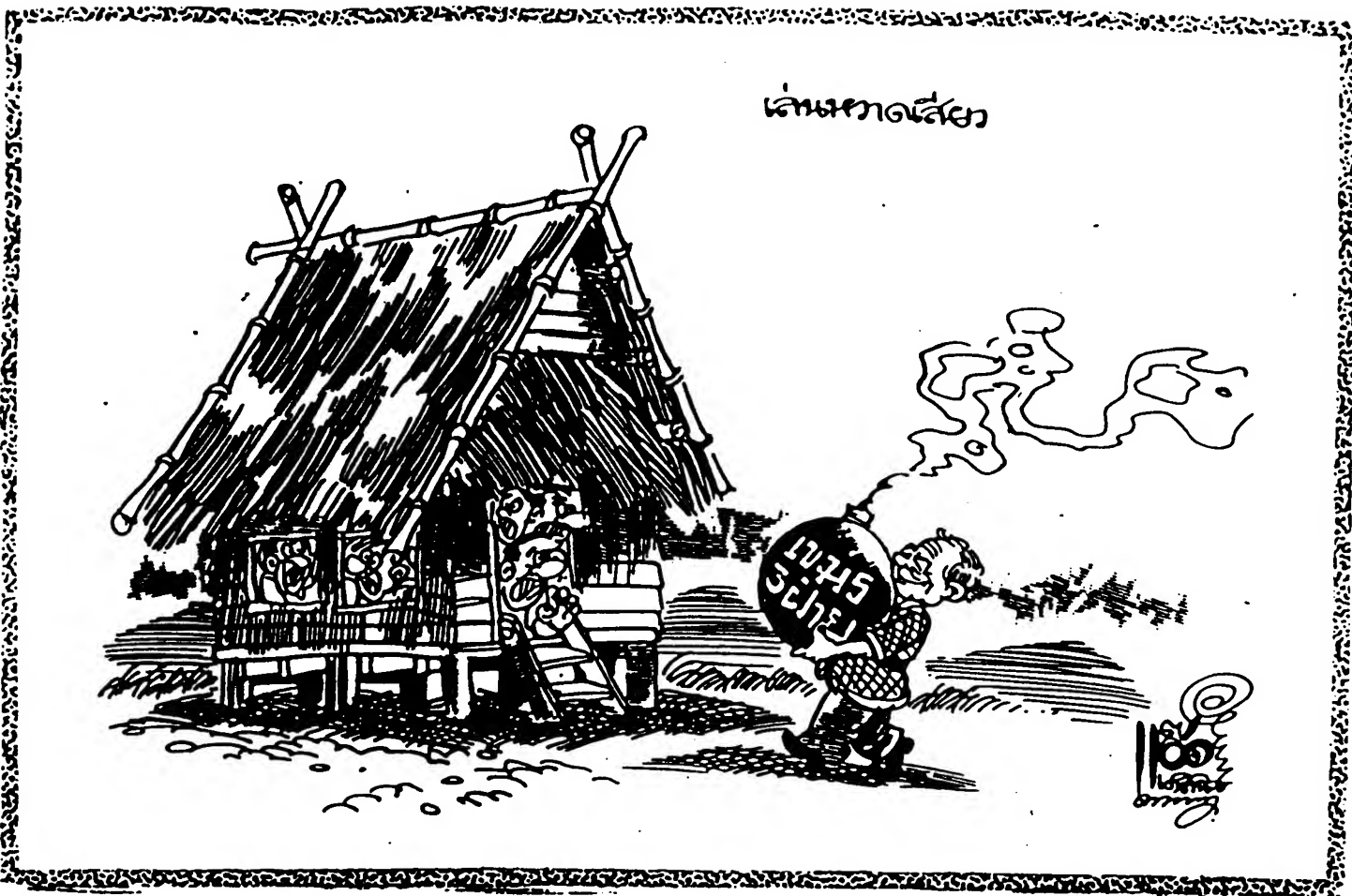
In addition to their stated goal of obtaining a negotiated settlement in Cambodia, we believe the Thai have a hidden agenda as well:

- Weakening a traditional enemy and diverting Vietnamese resources from possible use against Thailand.
- Preserving Cambodia's traditional role as a buffer state between Thailand and Vietnam for as long as possible.
- Preventing a permanent residual refugee population in Thailand. Since 1980, the Thai government has allowed Khmer to cross the border only temporarily to avoid Vietnamese attacks.

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Editorial Cartoons On Cambodian Policy



"A terrifying game." Daily Niu cartoon pictures Prime Minister Prem carrying in a time bomb, labelled "The three Khmer factions"--ANS, DK, KPNLF. Daily Niu is a Thai-language daily paper that generally takes a moderate, pro-government editorial line, although it can be outspoken in criticizing the government.

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Doubts about ASEAN. Bangkok Post cartoon shows Foreign Minister Siddhi as an ASEAN puppet being lowered into a mob of fighting Indochinese. The Bangkok Post is an unabashedly pro-government English-language daily.

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